

# COASTAL CONSERVANCY

Staff Recommendation

May 24, 2007

## LOWER VENTURA RIVER PARKWAY PLANNING PROJECT

File No. 07-021

Project Manager: Bob Thiel

**RECOMMENDED ACTION:** Authorization to disburse up to \$100,000 to the Trust for Public Land to carry out preliminary planning, stakeholder coordination and property analyses for development of a River Parkway program for the Lower Ventura River in the City of Ventura and portions of unincorporated Ventura County.

**LOCATION:** City of Ventura, County of Ventura (Exhibits 1, 2, and 3).

**PROGRAM CATEGORY:** Resource Enhancement

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### **EXHIBITS**

Exhibit 1: [Regional Location Map](#)

Exhibit 2: [Ventura County watersheds map](#)

Exhibit 3: [Map of the Lower Ventura River](#)

Exhibit 4: [Letters of Support](#)

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### **RESOLUTION AND FINDINGS:**

Staff recommends that the State Coastal Conservancy adopt the following resolution, pursuant to Sections 31251-31270 of the Public Resources Code:

“The State Coastal Conservancy hereby authorizes disbursement of an amount not to exceed one hundred thousand dollars (\$100,000) to the Trust for Public Land to carry out preliminary planning, stakeholder coordination and property analyses in the development of a River Parkway program for the Lower Ventura River, subject to the condition that prior to the disbursement of any funds, the Trust for Public Land shall submit for the review and written approval of the Conservancy’s Executive Officer a work program, budget, and schedule; and the names of any contractors to be employed in carrying out the work.”

Staff further recommends that the Conservancy adopt the following findings:

“Based on the accompanying staff report and attached exhibits, the State Coastal Conservancy hereby finds that:

1. The proposed project is consistent with the purposes and criteria of Chapter 6 of Division 21 of the Public Resources Code (Sections 31251-31270) regarding enhancement of coastal resources.
  2. The proposed project is consistent with the Project Selection Criteria and Guidelines adopted by the Conservancy on January 24, 2001.
  3. The project area has been identified in the certified Local Coastal Program of Ventura County as requiring public action to resolve existing or potential resource protection problems.
  4. The proposed project is undertaken at the request of the local jurisdiction, consistent with Public Resources Code Section 31251.2.
  5. The Trust for Public Land is a nonprofit organization existing under Section 501(c)(3) of the U.S. Internal Revenue Code, and whose purposes are consistent with Division 21 of the California Public Resources Code.”
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#### **PROJECT SUMMARY:**

Staff recommends that the Conservancy authorize disbursing \$100,000 to the Trust for Public Land (TPL) to create a conceptual plan and conduct preliminary property analyses that can be used in cooperation with public agencies and other stakeholders to develop and promote a River Parkway plan for the Lower Ventura River in Ventura County.

For a number of years, the Coastal Conservancy and several of its partners in Ventura County have worked to promote the creation of a river parkway program for the Ventura River---a comprehensive effort to acquire and restore a contiguous corridor of riparian habitat and open space along the 15 miles of the river from Matilija Dam and the City of Ojai to the estuary (See Exhibit 2). (The portion of the watershed above Matilija Dam is largely pristine, is part of the Los Padres National Forest, and has been considered outside the planning area for this river parkway program). For the purposes of the proposed project to be undertaken by TPL here, the section of the river termed the “Lower Ventura River” is defined as its lowest six miles: from the Foster Park area down through the estuary and Emma Wood State Beach (See Exhibit 3).

For the past two years, staff from the Trust for Public Land has undertaken a number of efforts in support of the River Parkway concept. TPL’s efforts have included (a) holding one-on-one meetings with resource agencies and conservation organizations to assess protection needs; (b) organizing and holding stakeholder meetings and developing presentation materials about a river parkway concept; (c) attending meetings of natural resource agencies and other groups to promote increased protection of the river; and (d) consulting with others on mechanisms to develop and promote a river parkway program. The proposed project would complement the efforts of TPL, the Coastal Conservancy and their partners in the County by providing information that can be used to engage the community and assist key partners in developing a community-based River Parkway plan for the lower Ventura River. This project would consist of four main elements:

**1. Develop a conceptual plan that promotes a vision for a Ventura River Parkway.** TPL would create materials---such as a color brochure or booklet (of perhaps 5- 20 pages) with pictures, maps, sketches and text---that would offer a conceptual idea for a Ventura River Parkway stretching from the Matilija Dam and Ojai area in the north down through the estuary. These materials would serve an educational tool for engaging partners, the community, and potential funding agencies and donors. The brochure would be modeled after similar documents prepared to illustrate conceptual visions of river parkway and other greenway efforts and would include examples of how other communities have worked to envision and protect such resources. The brochure could then form the basis for producing other materials---such as maps, posters or Power Point presentations---that could illustrate the basic concept of a river parkway for the Lower Ventura River.

**2. Identify willing sellers of riparian parcels in the Lower River Parkway area.** TPL staff would also perform a systematic analysis of landowner interest in participating in a river parkway program along the lower six miles of the river. TPL has already conducted some early feasibility analyses on seven particular landholdings, but its staff has noted that follow-up would be needed with those landowners as the concept of the parkway is developed further. In addition, other landowners need to be contacted and their willingness to participate assessed.

**3. Assist in identifying priority properties and restoration projects.** TPL staff would work with Coastal Conservancy and other partners to help create a prioritized list of potential targets for acquisition of fee title or conservation easements. Existing literature would be consulted to gather information regarding natural resources along the Lower Ventura River; it would then be combined with information on potential development projects collected from the City and County of Ventura to help identify threats and opportunities. Other information would be added as consultants to the Coastal Conservancy complete certain focused studies of the habitat value of floodplain acquisitions and the Watershed Protection District completes an assessment of portions of the Ventura River watershed with funding from a recent Proposition 50, Chapter 8 grant to the District under the Integrated Regional Water Management program.

**4. Perform preliminary site assessment for a potential demonstration project.** Under appropriate circumstances, TPL staff (working with its other partners on the River Parkway project) will conduct a preliminary analysis of a site that could become a demonstration protection or restoration project and thus help set the stage for subsequent projects on the lower river.

In each of these four efforts, TPL will consult with other partners and stakeholders in the Ventura River watershed, including the Ventura River Watershed Council. In particular, TPL will coordinate with local stakeholder groups and government agencies by interviewing key personnel and by participating in existing stakeholder meetings and processes.

The Trust for Public Land is a national 501(c)(3) organization whose mission is to “conserve land for people to enjoy as parks, community gardens, historic sites, rural lands, and other natural places, ensuring livable communities for generations to come.” As demonstrated by its successful completion of many projects with Coastal Conservancy funding, TPL has the requisite experience and expertise to execute and complete the proposed project along the Ventura River.

## **WATERSHED DESCRIPTION**

The Ventura River watershed encompasses about 226 square miles and is roughly 31 miles long between its headwaters in upper Matilija canyon in Los Padres National Forest and the outfall into the Pacific. The mainstem of the river originates at the junction of North Fork Matilija Creek and Matilija Creek and flows about 15.6 miles to the ocean. Downstream the river's principal tributaries are San Antonio Creek, Willis Creek, Rice Creek, Coyote Creek and Cañada Larga.

The major issue within the watershed has been the dramatic decline of Southern California steelhead trout (*Oncorhynchus mykiss*), a federally listed endangered species. Until the late 1940's the river ran essentially unimpeded to the ocean, and 4,000 to 5,000 adult steelhead would migrate up the river each year to spawn and rear, creating within the Ventura River one of the largest steelhead runs in the state.

But in 1948, the Ventura County Flood Control District built the 198-foot high Matilija Dam on the Ventura River to control flooding and alleviate persistent water supply shortages that supposedly plagued the watershed since the 1920s. The dam--- located approximately 0.6 miles upstream of the junction of North Fork Matilija Creek and Matilija Creek---included no fish passage and thus cutoff access to more than half of the historic steelhead spawning grounds. In the next two decades, the Bureau of Reclamation built other dams and diversions along several of the main creeks that feed the Ventura River, further impeding the river's natural flow.

Although Matilija Dam was constructed with a design reservoir capacity of more than 7,000 acre feet, notching in 1965 and 1978 and massive sedimentation have reduced the reservoir's capacity to less than 500 acre feet. Over 6 million cubic yards of sediment are estimated to reside in the reservoir, and the reservoir is projected to fill in completely by 2020. Within the past decade, a concerted effort has been made to develop a coordinated engineering and funding strategy for removal of the dam. Removal of Matilija Dam would not only allow for fish passage to historic steelhead breeding waters in the upper watershed, and greatly enhance the opportunities for restored habitat for the other species of concern, but it would also restore natural sediment transport downstream to nourish the region's beaches.

Because much of the river corridor has retained its rural character, there are a number of relatively intact examples of riparian cottonwood, California black walnut, sycamore and oak woodlands, as well as chaparral, flood plain, and grassland habitats along the river. The diverse habitats of the river and its watershed include high numbers of plant and animal species. Habitats in and near the Ventura River area sustain some of the highest diversity of vertebrate species in Southern California; nearly 300 vertebrate species are known in the lower reaches of the Ventura River alone. At least 26 special status species inhabit or utilize the aquatic, riparian and wetland habitats in the watershed, including 13 listed species (endangered, threatened or fully protected) and 13 California species of special concern. In addition to steelhead, the listed species include tidewater goby, Least Bell's vireo, Southwestern willow flycatcher, California brown pelican,

California least tern, peregrine falcon, Belding's savannah sparrow, ringtail, black-shouldered kite, western snowy plover, California red-legged frog and the California condor.

## PROJECT HISTORY

For a number of years, the Coastal Conservancy and other state agencies have supported community efforts to enhance, protect and restore the Ventura River watershed. They include the Matilija Dam Evaluation Project and Matilija Dam Removal Feasibility Study; a grant to the Casitas Municipal Water District to fund the design and construction of a fish ladder at the Robles Diversion on the mainstem; a \$132,000 grant to the Ventura County Watershed Protection District to help fund *Arundo* removal on a five-acre parcel along the Ventura River near Casitas Springs; and a \$100,000 grant to Santa Barbara Channelkeeper to conduct water quality monitoring and identify (and prepare conceptual plans for) habitat restoration opportunities in the Lower Ventura River watershed.

A \$3.1 million grant from the Coastal Conservancy allowed the Ojai Valley Land Conservancy to acquire the 1,556-acre Fairmont Ranch along the River, a site now known as the OVLC's Ventura River Preserve. In 2004, a \$450,000 grant from the Coastal Conservancy helped the OVLC acquire 14 acres in fee and a conservation easement of 16 acres for the OVLC's Confluence Property on the Ventura River at the mouth of San Antonio Creek. The property includes almost one-half mile of the Ventura River and San Antonio Creek, as well as a mature riparian, cottonwood, and sycamore forest.

In July 2005, the governing board of the Southern California Wetlands Recovery Project approved adding to its work plan a programmatic project for the Ventura River Parkway. Patterned after the Conservancy's river parkway program for the Santa Clara River in Ventura County, the program involves a multi-phased effort to acquire and restore a series of key riparian parcels along the Ventura River with the goal of creating a contiguous corridor of habitat and recreational open space along the river from Ojai to the estuary. The goal of this program---to be implemented in partnership with a number of other agencies and organizations---is to create a comprehensive river parkway along the lower 15 miles of the river. Because of the regional importance of the Ventura River corridor, a comprehensive river parkway program would help restore habitat linkages and connectivity, reconnect creek and river corridors to their floodplains, restore riparian and aquatic habitat, remove invasive species, and stabilize streambanks through environmentally-sensitive measures

The project to be implemented with the funds being requested here would complement the Conservancy's other efforts in the Ventura River watershed. The project would also assist other efforts now underway in the watershed, including the work of the community-based Ventura River Watershed Council, which formed in May 2006 and has since served as the mechanism for helping establish objectives and prioritizing projects in that watershed for the County's Integrated Regional Water Management Planning (IRWMP) effort.

**PROJECT FINANCING:**

Coastal Conservancy	\$100,000
Trust for Public Land	\$100,000
<b>Total Project Cost</b>	<b>\$200,000</b>

The anticipated source of funds for this project is an appropriation to the Conservancy from Proposition 50: the Water Security, Clean Drinking Water, Coastal and Beach Protection Act of 2002. Proposition 50 authorizes the use of such funds to protect coastal watersheds through projects that restore land and water resources. Funds may be used for planning and permitting associated with restoration, as well as restoration activities (Water Code §79570). The proposed project will accomplish those objectives by identifying restoration needs and opportunities along the Lower Ventura River and its tributaries and developing conceptual restoration plans that will allow for the restoration of coastal watersheds and associated wetlands located in the Ventura River watershed. As required by Proposition 50, the proposed project is consistent with local and regional plans, including the Basin Plan for the Coastal Watersheds of Los Angeles and Ventura Counties, which identifies the Ventura River as an impaired water body and mandates the protection of beneficial resources in the region's coastal watersheds.

**CONSISTENCY WITH CONSERVANCY'S ENABLING LEGISLATION:**

The proposed project would be undertaken pursuant to Chapter 6 of the Conservancy's enabling legislation, Division 21 of the Public Resources Code (Sections 31251-31270), regarding enhancement of coastal resources.

Under §31251, the Conservancy may award grants for the purpose of enhancement of coastal resources that, because of natural or human-induced events, or incompatible land uses, have suffered loss of natural and scenic values. Consistent with this section, the proposed project would lead to improvements in the quality and availability of degraded habitat in the lower Ventura River watershed by identifying habitat restoration opportunities and by the preparation of conceptual plans for protection and restoration along the river and its tributaries.

The proposed authorization is consistent with §31252, because the certified Local Coastal Program of the City of Ventura, as described in the "Consistency with Local Coastal Program Policies" section below, identifies the lower Ventura River and its riparian resources as in need of enhancement and restoration.

The proposed authorization is consistent with §31253, which states that the Conservancy may provide up to the total cost of any coastal resource enhancement project. In the present instance the Conservancy's contribution would represent about 50 percent of the funds needed to carry out the project. As a private, nonprofit organization qualified under Section 501(c)(3) of the Internal Revenue Code and whose purposes are consistent with Division 21 of the Public Resources Code, the Trust for Public Land is qualified to receive a grant from the Conservancy.

Under §31251.2, the Conservancy may undertake a project affecting an area partly outside the coastal zone if the local public agency having jurisdiction over the project area requests the Con-

servancy's assistance. The City of Ventura as the local public agency has requested and supports the Conservancy's assistance on this project (See Exhibit 4: Letters of Support).

The proposed authorization is also consistent with §31111, which authorizes the Conservancy to award grants to nonprofit organizations to undertake plans and feasibility studies that will implement Division 21.

#### **CONSISTENCY WITH CONSERVANCY'S STRATEGIC PLAN GOALS & OBJECTIVES:**

Consistent with **Goal 2, Objective A**, the proposed project would help develop a priority project to protect open space in coordination with other state and local agencies and non-profit partners

Consistent with **Goal 5, Objective A**, the proposed project will help protect, restore and enhance biological diversity in coastal areas by identifying threats to coastal areas for resource protection and enhancement, providing information that can be used to develop and implement resource enhancement plans for sections of the Lower Ventura River and its tributaries, and developing local capacity to plan and implement resource enhancement projects.

Consistent with **Goal 5, Objective B**, the proposed project will help protect, restore and enhance biological diversity in coastal areas by helping to identify potential acquisitions needed to create corridors from coastal habitats to inland habitat areas.

Consistent with **Goal 6, Objective A**, the proposed project will assist in developing plans and projects to preserve and restore coastal watersheds and create river parkways by promoting public outreach and community involvement.

Consistent with **Goal 7, Objective B**, the project will foster the long-term viability of coastal agriculture by helping identify the potential acquisition of buffer strips along sensitive habitat and watercourses.

The Ventura River Watershed is specifically cited in the Coastal Conservancy's *Strategic Plan* (2003, at page 55) as a locus for Goals 5 (Coast/Ocean Habitat) and 6 (Wetlands, Rivers & Watersheds) of the Plan.

#### **CONSISTENCY WITH CONSERVANCY'S PROJECT SELECTION CRITERIA & GUIDELINES:**

The proposed project is consistent with the Conservancy's Project Selection Criteria and Guidelines, adopted on January 24, 2001:

##### **Required Criteria**

1. **Promotion of the Conservancy's statutory programs and purposes:** See the "Consistency with Conservancy's Enabling Legislation" section above.

2. **Consistency with purposes of the funding source:** See the “Project Financing” section above.
3. **Support of the public:** The proposed project is supported by Assemblymember Pedro Nava First District County Supervisor Steve Bennett, and the City of Ventura, as well as by several local community-based organizations, including the Ventura River Watershed Council and the Ojai Valley Land Conservancy.
4. **Location:** The Ventura River is a critical coastal watershed in southern California and enhancement of habitat, water quality and other natural resources in the watershed is essential to the restoration and enhancement of significant coastal resources in the state, including riparian and watershed resources.
5. **Need:** At this time, TPL’s continued outreach efforts for a river parkway program cannot continue without Conservancy participation, because TPL must secure significant external funding if the project is to proceed. The planning analysis in this proposed project is needed to support efforts to protect and enhance the floodplain of the lower river.
6. **Greater-than-local interest:** Protection and restoration of the Ventura River is a regional priority because the river provides habitat and species linkages of regional and statewide significance. The river is critical to steelhead recovery in Southern California, and the Coastal Conservancy has dedicated substantial funds and staff time to various projects along the river. Restoration and enhancement of riparian habitat will be critical to efforts to promote the health of native coastal resources and to restore native steelhead trout runs in the Ventura River and its tributaries.

#### **Additional Criteria**

7. **Urgency:** The proposed grant will significantly aid current efforts to protect natural resources at risk from various encroachments and development threats. In addition, identification of acquisition and restoration opportunities for riparian habitat is critical to efforts aimed at restoring native steelhead trout runs.
8. **Resolution of more than one issue:** The project will address coastal resource protection, habitat restoration and species protection, water quality and watershed resource protection, and public education.
9. **Leverage:** See the “Project Financing” section above. TPL has committed substantial internal funds as a match for a Conservancy grant.
10. **Readiness:** By its implementation and completion of other projects funded by the Coastal Conservancy TPL has demonstrated its ability to start and finish this project in a timely manner.
11. **Realization of prior Conservancy goals:** As noted in the “Project History” section above, the Conservancy has funded a number of acquisition and restoration projects in the Ventura River to help promote watershed restoration and achieve steelhead recovery in the River. Implementation of this project will advance previous Conservancy projects by helping to identify other restoration opportunities as well.



12. **Cooperation:** The project would represent a significant level of cooperation among TPL, private landowners, and other stakeholders in the Ventura River watershed, including the Ojai Valley Land Conservancy, City of Ventura, Ventura County Watershed Protection District, Ventura River Watershed Council, and the Ventura Hillsides Conservancy.

#### **CONSISTENCY WITH LOCAL COASTAL PROGRAM POLICIES:**

The proposed project is consistent with the policy goals of the certified Local Coastal Program (LCP) of the City of San Buenaventura (the City of Ventura), as amended in 1990. The City's LCP includes policies which stress protection of the natural attributes and wildlife of the Ventura River (3.1), protection of sensitive wetland, riparian, and oak woodland habitat areas (e.g., policies 12.1, 12.4 and 12.6), preservation of the Ventura River in its existing semi-natural state and restoration to natural conditions (Policy 13.1), and cooperation with the Coastal Conservancy to protect and enhance the Ventura River estuary (policy 15.8).

The project would also help promote several major regional goals and Ventura County objectives in the Regional Strategy of the Southern California Wetlands Recovery Project. The project would promote at least four of the six Regional Goals of the Wetlands Recovery Project: restoring stream corridors in coastal watersheds, recovering native habitat and species diversity; integrating wetlands recovery with other public objectives; and promoting education related to coastal watersheds. The project also would help a key County's key objective in the Regional Strategy: preserving the existing floodplain of the Ventura River and reconnecting the river to its floodplain where feasible.

#### **COMPLIANCE WITH CEQA:**

The proposed project is statutorily exempt from the provisions of the California Environmental Quality Act (CEQA) under 14 Cal. Code of Regulations Section 15262 because it involves only feasibility or planning studies for possible future actions that the Conservancy has not yet approved, adopted or funded. The project is also categorically exempt from CEQA under 14 Cal. Code of Regulations Section 15306 to the extent that it will consist of basic data collection, information gathering and resource evaluation activities which will not result in a serious or major disturbance to an environmental resource. Staff will file a Notice of Exemption upon Conservancy approval of the project.